

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH ARMY MAJOR MATTHEW SMITH,
COMMANDER, 1ST BATTALION, 121ST INFANTRY REGIMENT, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM
GEORGIA SUBJECT: TRAINING EXERCISE IMMEDIATE RESPONSE NEAR TBILISI, GEORGIA
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Okay, sir.
Well, welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable. And the floor is yours, sir, if
you've got an opening statement for us.

MAJ. SMITH: Well, thanks, Jack. I'll start off by saying hello to
everybody and thanks for joining us tonight to discuss the role of the Georgia
Army National Guard in Exercise Immediate Response 2008, located in the Vaziani
training area just south of Tblisi, Georgia.

This exercise pulled together armed forces from all over the world. We
have, of course, our Georgia Guardsmen. There are soldiers from the country of
Georgia, obviously, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as active-duty U.S.
Army soldiers from Europe, Army Reservists from Oklahoma, members of the U.S.
Marine Corps Reserve from Ohio, and various other locations from through the
U.S. The overall purpose of the operation is to build cooperation in the
region and teach everyone involved how to work better with their coalition
partners. I can tell you from personal experience that there's learning taking
place by all the parties that are involved.

Now, for the battalion specifically, we have three major training
events that will take place during the exercise. We're conducting combat
lifesaving classes, fire team live fires, and then platoon situational training
lanes. These events are good training for the Georgians, but they're also key
for our battalion's mission train-up for employment to Afghanistan a little less
than 12 months from now.

Now, part of that prep is our working through the language barriers
here with the Georgians and other coalition partners. So, in all these events
we integrate fully with our Georgian counterparts to kind of force that
situation, if you will, and cause our soldiers to work through those language
issues.

Last week I went through the combat lifesaving classes. And those
classes, as some of you may know, teach soldiers the basic skills to sustain
life until a better-trained -- you know, school-trained medic can arrive or a
soldier can be aeromedevaced.

Now, for the classes, we don't actually separate. We integrate the Georgians and the American squads. The medics either work through the interpreters -- one of the most amazing things that I have seen to date is just watching the soldiers figure out how to communicate regardless of the presence of an interpreter. It's a pretty amazing thing to see.

Likewise with the live fire lanes. Georgians are integrated with the squads. When they go downrange and engage targets, they're doing so together. That is obviously a pretty intense experience for everybody. Likewise the platoon maneuver lanes require more detailed cooperation and planning because of the higher-echelon training at the platoon level, both between our soldiers and the Georgians.

We use contemporary operating environment scenarios, where they might encounter improvised explosives, conduct some sort of civic engagement with a mayor or other leader.

Obviously, they'll deal with insurgents. And then throughout we have civilians on the battlefield and the media as well.

So it's been great watching these teams develop. After just a couple days, they're up and running, looking like they've been training together for several years, learning from each other both tactically, culturally. And frankly, not despite the language barrier but because of it a tremendous amount of benefit is coming out of the whole experience.

So obviously I could go on at length about this, but that gives you a little bit of background and at this point it would probably be good to open it up to your questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Grim, you were first online, so why don't you get us started?

Q Yes, sir. I would like to ask you, this year at Cobra Gold, down in Thailand, part of the training focused on civil affairs, where they were doing some preparatory work of the similar kind that your folks are doing, getting ready to go to Afghanistan. And one of the things they did, for example, was build a school for some local schoolchildren. Are you guys doing similar sort of civil affairs training or does this focus mostly on kinetics?

MAJ. SMITH: Our battalion specifically is doing both kinetic and non-kinetic training. However, for the task force -- the broader task force, there have been, from what I understand, some significant civil affairs projects that have taken place before and are still going on. And we are doing some community outreach with local orphanages around the Tbilisi area in the next week or so.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Andrew?

Q Yes, sir. Andrew Lubin, from the U.S. Naval Institute's "Get the Gouge". How are you, sir?

MAJ. SMITH: I'm doing great.

Q Good. Got two questions for you, then I'll pass it back to Grim. First of all, you've had the -- you got the Azerbaijanis and the Armenians, two groups of people who've hated each other for, you know, thousands of years, fought a war recently in Nagorno-Karabakh. How are they doing together?

MAJ. SMITH: You know, actually, they're all living on our floor of the barracks together. So they -- I guess by virtue of the fact that no blood has been shed yet, they're doing pretty well. They're actually participating in a different aspect of the overall exercise, which is a command post exercise that's being conducted. And from what I understand, you know, they all sit around the table together in the tent for 10 or 12 hours a day with no issues. So that aspect of the exercise has been going very well, too, from what I understand.

Q Great, okay. Going back to Cobra Gold and Grim's question, what kind of live fire did you have? Were you talking small arms? Did you do any heavy-duty stuff, like artillery, like they did a lot in Cobra Gold?

MAJ. SMITH: No, no, very basic level small arms. You know, the largest weapon system was the M249 SAW. So we're focused at the fire team level and just trying to get the basics -- foundation built, if you will, for upcoming stuff that will take place over the next year.

Q Okay. Grim, you got one or can I go on?

Q Was there someone else on the call besides us?

MR. HOLT: No, that's -- it's just you two. Just go right ahead.

Q Oh, all right. Major, I was with -- I was a civilian advisor with MND-C, which is where the 3rd and then the 1st Georgian Brigade was serving in Iraq. Do you have any soldiers out there who have served with the Georgians in Iraq with you at this time?

MAJ. SMITH: No, none of them are with us at this time. As you may know, there was a team from the Georgia on the National Guard embedded with the 3rd Brigade.

They just recently returned home. And we're getting ready to stand up another team to go downrange with the 4th Brigade, but none of those personnel are with us right now.

Q Thank you.

Q Major, Andrew Lubin again. (Bases ?) that the Georgians were predominantly Soviet-based or along -- you know, Soviet-oriented, how is their staff NCOs? Are they good, or do you got to retrain them from scratch?

MAJ. SMITH: I'm sorry. Did you say how are ours or theirs?

Q No, no, ours are fine. I'm talking about theirs.

MAJ. SMITH: (Chuckles.) Okay. You know, we -- interestingly, we just had an NCO day today, during which all the senior NCOs from all participating units paired up with their Georgian counterparts, and went out and observed, you know, numerous training events, including the three rotational events that all battalions involved in. Their NCO corps, as you might assume, is not as well-

developed as ours, because of coming up until just about two decades ago under that Soviet system.

But as a result of that, (once ?) they got their emergence from that system, I think their NCOs now are like sponges. They just want to learn as much as they can, which is a great way for us to strengthen our relationship between the Georgia National Guard and the Georgian Armed Forces, because, you know, we have a long, proud and distinguished history of developing our own NCO corps. And in an environment like this, with fewer NCOs that are so eager to learn, it really -- it gives our NCOs a great opportunity to engage and coach, teach and mentor, and with a receptive audience. So it's gone a long way towards bonding our -- our organizations together.

Q Okay. Are their officers merit-based, or are they more old Communist Party officials whose kids have been appointed? Do you have feel for that?

MAJ. SMITH: Actually, that's something the CG spoke to us about, about a week and a half or so ago, indicating that now within the Georgian Armed Forces the officer positions are, in fact, merit-based or experience-based. So it's -- I guess it has progressed from the previous days. MR. HOLT: Great. Thank you.

Grim?

Q Yes, sir. Well -- Andrew, what I was going to ask this gentleman?

MR. HOLT: (Chuckles.)

Q Well, I was going to ask, Grim, if I was you, is --

Q Okay.

Q -- Major, with the Georgians having their own kind of civil war up there with the Russians on the one end, they got these two breakaway republics in there whose names I can't pronounce, you must have some combat-ready troops coming back. Or are they getting spun up to go up there and duke it out for real?

MAJ. SMITH: You know, the focus of our training with them is not related to their other geopolitical issues. We're basically focused on getting us ready to go to Afghanistan and getting these guys ready to go to Iraq.

To your point about, you know, combat-ready, many of the older folks in their ranks -- and that's a relative term, of course -- have been fighting for a long time with various different entities. But for the purposes of our involvement and immediate response, 2008, none of that has come into play.

Q Okay.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Sir, I've got a question for you as for the exercise itself. How long does this exercise run? And what are -- you know, what's on the agenda for the rest of your time?

MAJ. SMITH: Well, we -- our battalion has been here since the 14th. And we will redeploy back to Atlanta on the 2nd of August.

Now, as you might imagine, elements, you know, their early entry folks were here well before we got here. I'm sure there will be -- (inaudible) -- here well after we leave. So I guess total duration is relative to whichever entity you're talking about, but certainly more than a month in terms of U.S. soldiers on the ground.

In terms of the remaining week or so that we have, we will continue to work through our rotation in our three companies that are here, that being the combat lifesaver and the live fire lanes and then the situational training lane. And then we'll begin the redeployment process in earnest. And as many of you may know, that process in and of itself has a tremendous training value for us. So although it will be a challenge, we're looking forward to that and the learning that comes from that as well.

Q Sir, with Georgia being so mountainous, I can understand it being perfect for training for Afghanistan. How is it pertinent to training for Iraq?

MAJ. SMITH: Well, it's hot, and it's a dry heat. The --

Q As opposed to Atlanta, so I get your drift.

MAJ. SMITH: Right. (Laughs.)

It's -- I don't know that you can draw a comparison to Iraq. You know, we're focused on individual task training with our Georgian counterparts, you know, to the extent we can improve our proficiency and their proficiency at those kind of foundational training elements. The benefit that comes from that can be applied to any location.

Of course, the other aspect of it is that Georgians, when they're operating as part of the coalition in Iraq, they'll be dealing with American soldiers on a daily basis, I'm sure. So you know, you get the language and cultural piece that helps train them for that.

As I mentioned earlier, it also exposes some of our own challenges, in dealing with another force besides English-speaking forces, which our battalion will likely have to do downrange. So I think just across the board, it will help strengthen both parties for their future operations, regardless of the actual physical environment. Q Okay, fair enough. Point taken. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Grim, anything else.

Q I would just like to ask how they've taken to the combat lifesaving course. It's a rather different course than most kinds of first aid and lifesaving, as you probably know. I'm just wondering if it strikes them as being as revolutionary a concept as it was when I first encountered it.

MAJ. SMITH: You know, I think, that is probably a good way to summarize their reaction to it, because it is so much more in-depth than, you know, that basic level kind of stuff you get in basic combat training.

And there have been a number of concepts that were revealed, if you will, or brought to the forefront that the Georgian forces simply did not have

visibility of, one of which -- today, our operation sergeant major was talking with one of his counterparts about the idea of casualty feeder cards and putting some sort of treatment information of what this soldier's already been through before he or she enters the recovery process or treatment process, and that was something that to his Georgian counterpart, he had never countered that before. And that's just one example.

So it's been tremendously beneficial, I think. And you know, it's great for us, too, of course, to get this many people through the training, but to really see it evolve in our coalition partners and see them really sink their teeth into it has been pretty neat.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Anything else? Anyone else?

Q Just a quick one. Major, if you could send over two or three JPEG over to Mr. Holt, two or three pictures in the next day. I'll put a good article up, but pictures will always be helpful.

MAJ. SMITH: Okay, who does it -- who do the pictures need to go to?

MR. HOLT: You can just send them to me, sir, or the New Media Outreach that -- Major Alderman's (sp) got our e-mail address. He can send it to us and I'll get them disseminated through to everybody else.

MAJ. SMITH: Okay. He's giving me a thumbs-up, so that's easy do.

MR. HOLT: All right. Sounds good.

Well, sir, do you have anything else for us? Any closing comments for us?

MAJ. SMITH: Yeah, just to say that as hopefully you can tell from my earlier comments it's just been great working -- (audio break) -- operating environment, obviously something that's very important.

And I think no matter where we as U.S. forces go in the world, we're going to have to learn to work better with other forces who may not share our language or culture. And this has been great preparation for that, great preparation for the battalion's mission to Afghanistan next year. And we're just happy and thankful to continue to build our relationship with the Georgians and to train our coalition partners for their own mission downrange, which hopefully everybody will be very successful at.

So with that, I think that would take care of the call.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Well, thank you very much for joining us. With us on the call for the DOD Bloggers Roundtable is Major Matthew Smith, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 121st Infantry Regiment of the Georgia Army National Guard in the Republic of Georgia on Exercise Immediate Response '08. Thanks so much for being with us, sir.

MAJ. SMITH: All right. Thank you all.

Q Major, thank you for the time tonight.

END.